

# Targeted online ads can actually change how you view yourself

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Online advertisements targeted specifically at you because of your behavior can actually change how you feel about yourself, a new study suggests.

In a series of experiments, researchers found that young Internet users tended to embrace the identity labels - such as "environmentally conscious" or "sophisticated"—implied by the online ads they received. The key was that they needed to know that the ads were targeted to them because of their browsing history.

For example, in one experiment, people felt more environmentally conscious after they received a behaviorally targeted ad for a "green" product.

"The power of a behaviorally targeted ad for a green product isn't just that it persuades you to buy the advertised product. It actually makes you feel more environmentally conscious and can change your behavior," said Rebecca Walker Reczek, co-author of the study and associate professor of marketing at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"In a sense, you become more like what the ads say you are."

That's what the researchers found in one experiment involving 188 college students. The students spent 10 minutes on the Internet, much of it browsing on websites they chose. Afterward, the students were

presented an online ad for a fictitious restaurant called Eatery 21, which advertised "Refreshingly Sophisticated American Classics."

All of the students received the same ad. But some were told the ad was targeted to them based on their earlier Internet browsing. Others were told the ad was sent to them because of their demographics, such as gender and age. Others were not given any information about why they received the ad.

Participants were then shown a fictitious Groupon coupon for Eatery 21 (offering a discount on food purchased) and asked how likely they would be to purchase it.

Study participants who were told that the ad was targeted to them because of their Internet browsing history were more likely than others to say that the ad suggested they had "sophisticated food preferences." (Remember that the ad said the restaurant offered "sophisticated American classics.")

They were also more likely to say they would purchase the Groupon than those in the other two groups.

"When you know that you have been targeted by a specific ad, you realize that the ad carries information about you - and that can change how you view yourself," said Christopher Summers, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in marketing at Ohio State.

"In this case, receiving a behaviorally targeted ad from a restaurant suggesting that you are a 'sophisticated' food consumer makes you think, 'I may be more sophisticated than I thought.' That in turn makes you more likely to buy a Groupon for the restaurant."

The participants who were targeted because of their demographic

characteristics were not more likely to purchase the Groupon compared to participants who did not think the ad was targeted.

"Just being aware of being targeted is not enough to change how you act," said Robert W. Smith, co-author of the study and assistant professor of marketing at Ohio State.

"The targeting has to be based on your behavior and not just demographic attributes such as age or gender," Smith said.

When the targeting is based on behavior, consumers believe the advertiser is labeling them as a particular type of consumer: a sophisticated consumer, or a green consumer. Those are the types of labels that can change people's views about themselves.

"The reason this works is because it is changing your self-perceptions first. If an ad makes you feel sophisticated or environmentally conscious, you are more likely to engage in all kinds of behaviors related to that trait - not just buy the advertised product," Reczek said.

For example, in one experiment, participants who received a behaviorally targeted ad for an environmentally friendly product were more likely than others to donate to an environmental cause later because they saw themselves as being more "green" as a result of receiving the ad.

One key qualification: The information the behaviorally targeted ad conveys about the consumer must be accurate. In one experiment, targeted ads for outdoor products had no impact on the perceptions and behaviors of consumers who had no interest in outdoor activities.

"The ad has to be plausible to the consumer for it have any effect," Reczek said.

While the advertising industry has been reluctant to tout its use of targeted ads because of privacy concerns, this research suggests there may be benefits for companies that indicate to consumers that they are sending ads meant specifically for them.

"If you're a person who goes out hiking occasionally and you see a behaviorally targeted ad for hiking boots that suggests you're rugged and outdoorsy, our results suggest you will feel more outdoorsy and then be more likely to buy that product," Reczek said.

How do consumers even know that they are receiving behaviorally targeted ads? One way is that online marketers actually tell them. The marketing industry has adopted the "AdChoices" icon (a small blue triangle that usually appears in the corner of advertisements) to indicate that the ad is meant especially for the consumer who receives it. However, surveys suggest few people know what the icon means, at least so far.

The study's findings have broader implications beyond advertising, Smith said.

"We like to think we are quite certain of who we are, but this study suggests that's not quite the case," he said. "We are actually open to suggestions that can change, for example, how 'outdoorsy' or 'sophisticated' we feel we are. Our views of ourselves can be nudged one way or the other by something as simple as an online ad."

The study appears online in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

**More information:** Christopher A. Summers et al. An Audience of One: Behaviorally Targeted Ads as Implied Social Labels, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucw012](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw012)

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